

Rojabi Azharghany

## **CAPITALIZING THE SACRED: Marketing Blessed Water as Religious Therapy in Krejengan Probolinggo**

Universitas Nurul Jadid Probolinggo  
Email: [azharghany@gmail.com](mailto:azharghany@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *This study considers a question of whether blessings are commodified in the ritual practices of religious therapy associated with the certain religious figures. Buying the Air Berkah (Holy Water) from Habib Hasan Al Muhdor, a religious leader of Majelis Shalawat Abbabul Musthofa, is a continuous tradition practiced by local Muslims at Widoro Krejengan Probolinggo. By observing this religious (or economic?) therapy, this study attempts to argue that they have been transmitting the material thing, money, into the blessing of the attendant spirit mediums. As they received blessing and magical item from the medium air berkah, they reached for wallets to make donation. This study goes to analyze the ways their stock of knowledge are constructed through ritualized practices of buying air berkah and the ways it reproduced the social structure of Krejengan community associated with their religious belief in the commodified item of blessing. It leads this study to conclusion that religion of the masses requires holy men to satisfy the needs of ordinary men and women, and hence the sacred and charisma are corrupted by the demand for miracles and spectacles through certain mechanism, including religious therapy.*

**Keywords:** *air berkah, the sacred, religious therapy*

## Preface

Recently, phenomenon of *pengajian*, *sholawatan*, and *halaqah* by offering the commodified prayers and blessings in a bottled water, either offline or online, is highly considerable in Indonesia. Some of bottled sacred waters are, to mention a few, *KH-Q* from Yayasan Arwaniyah Kudus, *Ajab Water* owned by Habib Riziq, *Air Budha* in Borobudur, *Air Nur Syifa*, *Air Rukyah*, and *Ali Jaber's* blessed water from Ali Jaber, *Az Zikra* belonging to Arifin Ilham, *Air Quaya*, *Air Majelis Rasulullah* belonging to Habib Mundzir, *Air Santri* from Pesantren Sidogiri, and *VO2* as blessed drinking water from Habib Syekh. In Probolinggo, there is *Air Doa* belonging to Habib Hasan al-Muhdor, a leader of Majelis Ahbabul Mustofa and elder of Pesantren Azzahir in Widoro, Krejengan, Probolinggo.

Habib Hasan's blessed water is taken from well of his pesantren. After the distillation and refill process, this water is packaged as like in many refilled water depots. Nothing special during the process. Then, the water is put into the no-labelled packages of various bottles and gallons. These packages are promoted to all followers of the majlis, but they can also buy them at Pesantren Azzahir.

A routine *shalawatan* held by Majelis Ahbabul Mustofa also became a marketing medium through which the blessed waters are promoted for sale. Habib Hasan and his followers also take regular lectures and *sholawat* tours in different places. In certain months, such as *Ramadan*, *Muharram*, *Rajab*, and *Rabiul Awal*, they go around many *pesantren* in Indonesia and have a pilgrimage to the sacred tombs of the saints. Of course, not only a regular team of followers, but also many *santri* of Pesantren Azzahir participated in these events.

At the entrance of *shalawatan* event, many packaged waters are displayed with various sizes of bottles, from small, medium, to large ones. A number of people and *santri* could purchase them in accordance with their various needs, such as for *slamatan* of baby birthday, for healing, for getting a couple, for supporting a sustenance, for succeeding trade, etc.

Ghofur (34-year-old) said, he purchased the water for the sake of his upcoming baby birth.

My wife is pregnant, and this week my child will be born. I will ask my wife to drink this water nearly her child's birth. Hopefully my child will be born safely and be a pious child, also hopefully my wife's birthing process can be smooth.  
(interview with Muhammad Ghafur, 12/08/2017)

After purchasing the waters, some members put them in front of Habib Hasan, *habaib*, and other *kiai* leading to recitation of *shalawatan*. Those who can't put them in front of *habaib* usually put them in front of themselves. The lid of bottles are opened, since reciting prayer and *sholawat* can penetrate its virtues into the water.

When the event has finished, *sholawat* guide announced that they can take their water in front.

"For pilgrims who do not have a time to purchase the water ... please go to the officers at the entrance."

People can also come to Habib Hasan at Pesantren Azzahir. Before coming to Habib, they firstly purchase the water in the stores of Pesantren. In front of Habib Hasan, they explain their intentions, and lid of the bottle is opened, then Habib Hasan recites the prayer by raising his hand, and they followed it by reading *Amen*. Most blessed waters are requested for healing illness, but there is also for other purposes, i.e. for pregnancy, for economic problems, for smooth business, as well as for inner anxiety, also those who had difficulty in sleeping, or had family problems; had less fertile plant problems; and had a plan of building new houses.

Not only led prayers, Habib Hasan also provided religious messages related to people's intent of using the waters. Habib Hasan insisted that these blessed wates are only a medium, an endeavor for getting God's merit. A final result is up to God's decision.

Regarding to use of these waters, Habib Hasan explained that God created everything with *sabab* (causality) in terms of media established by God Himself. He continued, God created *sabab* to provide multiple choices; ordinary and extraordinary; conventional and nonconventional. Ordinary *sabab* is a common causality, in a sense that it is not strange because it always happens. On the contrary, extraordinary *sabab* is a rare causality, in a sense that it is strange, rarely happening.

His opinion about number of people asking for blessed water is reasonable. However, he continued, it needs to notice that people are prohibited to hand their affairs over the person being asked for, because this practice will be trapped into *kufr*. At the same time, it should be understood that the most important *sabab* in Islamic teaching is prayer. The problem of choosing *sabab* with other media is only based on personal choice.

Become a person to whom people asked for the blessed water, he argues, is a primordial role in providing services to common people, because they still consider this is a necessity. This role can also be used as a medium of Islamic preaching in motivating people to be diligent and obedient worshippers.

If the illness is a physical one, then Habib Hasan asks first whether he/she (one who asked for blessed water) has checked up in medical treatment? Sometimes Habib Hasan also suggests her/him to consume certain herbal medicine. It is concluded that not only giving blessed water, Habib Hasan also attempts to suggesting alternative medicines, depending on the different situation.

Asking for blessed water is based on belief in God. If someone is confident of it, Habib Hasan will say “God’s willing” (*insyaallah*) for usefulness of the water. Conversely, if not sure, it will not be useful. It is in accordance with *hadith qudsi*: “ana inda dzonni abdibi” (I—Allah—am depending on how my servant harangues Me). It is also case for *busnudzon* (good suspicion) to someone else. The *busnudzon* is able to produce a good suggestion, and then it will also encourages people to be sure of what they are doing. If they are not sure, they will not have a positive suggestion on benefits of the blessed water.

Actually, people asked the blessed water not only to habib or kiai. Many people also ask it to *shaman* or other. Furthermore, he warned public to be careful.

Not only those who come to the habib or kiai, even those who are asked to give the blessed water are possible to have various intentions, to make it as medium for various purposes as well, such as making money, gaining political purpose, etc, as many people who recite Al-Quran, read *shalawat*, have various purposes.

In fact, the facts ask for this water of prayer to persist, he delivered, because people in his life would someday be a dead end.

When that happens, eventually humans look for alternatives that vary; some to the kiai, some to the shaman. Some even commit suicide. Actually they want to run to God, but some do not know how.

Asking for blessed water, he states, will be continuously insist. Using the logics of monotheistic religion, this fact is quite reasonable. However, the logics of medicine is not directly connected with the religious sciences, then it probably does not make sense. Today, many people combine medical and non-medical approaches; an inner-spiritual approach with a physical-physical approach. In fact, there are various judgments—both from oneself and others—relating to one's efforts to achieve his/her life's goals. Some considered it as logical-fair, but some of them considered it as non-logical and un-reasonable.

### **Desecularization**

The embedded religious values into spiritual market, mass media, and marketing strategies has affirmed prosperity of religion in daily life. The blessed water is part of packaged religiosity to gain an important market segment in spiritual market. They are people who need an alternative way to fulfill their livelihood. Also, various issues, including economic, medical, salvation, or family problems are part of a market segment through which people are possible to promote the blessed water. Considering about importance of providing services to community, as Habib Hasan recognized, people's need for blessed water should be facilitated. In order to facilitate people who get Habib Hasan's blessed water, Ahbabul Mustofa radio has advertised them on-air.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, Majelis Ahbabul Mustofa also held a routine *shalawatan* in many places, a host usually makes an announcement on a place to where people can purchase the blessed water. As mentioned above, it is possible to get the blessed water during *shalawatan* event or come to Habib Hasan in his *pesantren*. Those who purchase the blessed water in the event usually put it in front of lineup (*shaf*) before Habib Hasan who sits with other *habaib* and

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<sup>1</sup> Radio Ahbabul Mustofa is a radio that is under the management of Sholawat Ahbabul Mustofa pilgrims belonging to Habib Hasan. The radio is addressed in Krejengan.

*kiai*. The lid of bottle is opened in order to make sure that virtues of prayer and *shalawat* are possible to penetrate the water.<sup>2</sup>

Those who come directly to Habib Hasan are usually asked in advance of their needs, then Habib Hasan leads a prayer in front of the bottles. After praying, Habib Hasan makes some advices to the people who asked for the blessed water. When they are to leave, they usually greeted Habib Hasan with an closed envelop containing varied amounts of money, ranging from IDR 50,000 to IDR 100,000 and even more. The purpose is an effort to get blessing (*ngalap berkah*) from *habib* with a wish that their needs could be under God's guarantee.<sup>3</sup>

This phenomenon argues that a blessed water for worldly needs combining with certain sacred prayer and *shalawatan*, is a result of mixed procedure between people as consumer and Habib Hasan as producer in the market mechanism domain. This is mechanism of what Berger said 'sacred canopy', a famous metaphor of Berger (1969) which means that a world is religiously defined in which there is always a design of moral order and spiritual protection for people who involved with worldly economic transaction. The blessed water from Habib Hasan is commodified as 'worldly product' as an effort to solve needs of 'sacred goals', i.e. salvation and prosperity. People are invited to create a moral order by constructing a need for purchasing the blessed water as 'commodified' product. For Aminullah (26), a blessed water becomes a lighter for him to be eager in solving problems of life because of that blessing. People believed that blessed water is a spiritual effort to get closer with God's merit, and furthermore they are willing to pay for much costs in order to get the sacred things, the sacred waters.

The constructed design of moral order and spiritual protection through the blessed water makes people to be trapped into duality: sacred and profan; they need a sacred thing, but to do that they have to first purchase it after reading 'profan' advertisement and promotion. This is a fact of what Berger reminds us that we are impossible to 'step out' from this canopy. Ignoring it will make

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<sup>2</sup> Interview with Munadif (25) 25/08/2017

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Aminullah (26) 26/08/2017. He asked the water of prayer for the healing of his parents who have since 2 years ago suffered from struk disease.

people to 'enter a chaotic darkness, become anomized, perhaps even get into insanity' (Berger 1969). Bambang (32), for instance, prefers to use blessed water because it is more practical than having to see a doctor.

"Because of a fact that lots of my friends, after going to doctor, have to decide about surgery birth, tried an alternative medicine by asking for blessed water to *kiai* or *habib*, and it turns out smooth and normal."

(interview with Bambang 21/08/2017)

By looking at the evidences, Bambang believes that drinking blessed water is a kind of reasonable act, not merely non-logical/spiritual one. When his wife is pregnant or want to give birth, Bambang felt uncomfortable if he did not get such blessed water for his wife.

The blessed water is a part of ritualized symbolic practices tied with certain system of values. It is a sacred canopy in which the blessed water creates communal bonds between sacred and profane both in cosmos and cosmic levels. People who put the blessed water in front of *habaib* are encouraged to participate with other *jamaah* in *shalawatan* event. Meanwhile, those who have come to Habib Hasan several times to ask for the blessed water have successfully created a common sense on Habib Hasan's patronase among them. The communal bond is not just for the sake of *shalawatan*, but more than it, attachment of all worldly-spiritually exchanges related to various interests of life, such as safety and prosperity. Using the blessed water also had impacts on construction of society in embedding religiosity into their lives. Any endeavor combined with religious or religious practice, however, is 'human endeavor in constructing the sacred cosmos' (Berger 1969).

Furthermore, a distinction between the sacred and the profane in Weber's idea is no longer relevant. It is not theoretically appropriate to put religious commodities in Indonesia into conceptual spectrum of secularization by assuming that commodification has transformed religion into merchandise through various scales and modes of market transactions. Utilization of the blessed water has clearly proved that many people still believe that drinking them is related to Allah in searching *sabab* to solve the problem of life. Additionally, market mechanisms in promoting the blessed water are exposed as a relationship of

symbiotic mutualism. Marketing the blessed water is not just merely for sake of bussiness, but in order to provide a service to the community as confirmed by Habib Hasan. This process seems to confront against rationalized idea of secularization which predicted a significant decrease of religion in front of modern technological development and its impact on decline of social action (and consciousness) among rationalized society. Conversely, the popular use of the blessed water from Habib Hasan is a district criticism against secularism; more rationalized people are, more spiritual they are; more technological devices they used, more blessed things they expected to solve their problems.

Lyon confidently states that 'secularization as a meta-narrative is dead' (Lyon, 2000). In fact, many people are rationally modernized, given scientifically advanced technologi and prosperously economic levels, but more and more people tend to be fascinated by their beliefs (Kitiarsa, 2013). The various access to modernized facilities and technology in health, educational, economic, and cultural domains do not make Krejengan people a secular society. Using the blessed waters, for instance, is an important evidence on the ways people are impossible to be released from 'sacred canopy' eventhough they are most rationalized people. Based on theory of limited reason, according to J. G. Frazer as quoted Koentjaraningrat (1987), human solve problems with their reason and knowledge system, but these are limited. More advanced a culture is, wider a reason is limited; in many cultural systems, limits of human reason are very constricted. What impossible to solve are solved by using magic.

Thus, desecularization has been embedded into personal problems. Habib Hasan's advices during meeting to asking for the blessed water or during Ahbabul Musthofa event had a great contribution on people's desire to make a prosperity, to go through market mechanisms, to involve with religious groups, including pesantren and majlis shalawat, through dissemination of radio advertisement and pamphlets on benefits of the blessed water.

When the blessed water is communally used by many people from different backgroups, it has an effect on formation of deprivatisation, a condition in which a private, intimate, or personal bussiness became communal, public, among religious people. The blessed water is no longer used by certain people. Because the focus



of this event is to make a large amount of mass, market mechanism becomes a strategic way to organize external networks to make sure that the blessed water was increasingly widespread among many people.

The social and economic exchanges have taken place, both before, during, and after the events. The prosperity of religion, as Kitiarsa (2008) stated, which promotes success, wealth and material health, has evolved in modern times. A fact that Probolinggo people need to consume the blessed water for sake of salvation of infants, for healthy birthing process, for having a pious and intelligent child, for healing from various diseases, for obtaining a spouse, for getting livelihood, for making successful trade, etc., is a process of how prosperity of religion really takes a place.

### **Patronage**

Public's interest in blessed water has something to do with Habib Hasan's sacred genealogy among Probolinggo people. As revealed by Mahfudz (40) who believes in efficacy of the water as therapy, because it is purified by 'a pure man.'

"I am convinced that a *habib* is descendant of Prophet; his blood is sacred; his affinity to Prophet is direct, and it is also to God. Hopefully, with Habib Hasan's prayer to this water, my family can always be given health and salvation by God."  
(Interview with Mahfudz Adhim 14/08/2017)

Among Indonesia society, a *habib*'s character is generally equal with *kiai*, a religious leader of *pesantren*, but *babaib* (many *habibs*) has a higher position than *kiai*. It is easily found that *kiai* gives a certain privilege to *babaib*'s offspring and descendants living in *pesantren*. A number of large *pesantren* in East Java, such as Lirboyo in Kediri and Sidogiri in Pasuruan, provide a special rule to *babaib* who learn (*nyantri*), for instance without having to be obedient to the common rules at *pesantren*.

It argues that people in East Java, whom commonly settled around *pesantren*, have a strong appeal to such holy figures like *kiai* or *habib*. They are Islamic clerics with charismatic authority; they are blessed; they have authority outside common, profane, and worldly daily life. Having this extraordinary status makes their leadership more recognizable and acceptable among common people. Their authorities are stronger with their close relationship with members

of society. They became a translator of religious *fatwa*; they are part of strategic-religious elite in society.

By having this position, as Bourdieu (1977) said, every disposition coming from *kiai* or *habib* will be trusted, and a combination of potencies (position and disposition) will produce a habitus of asking for the blessed water as practical consciousness. Moreover, they are claimed as *waratsatul-anbiya* (the heirs of Prophet) with Islamic teachings of *aqidah* (belief), *ibadah* (worship), and *akhlak* (moral). With having social task of giving service for community in one side, and theological task of providing Islamic teaching in another side, makes *kiai* or *habib*'s positions difficult to be replaced by common people (Siradj, 1998).

It is a reason that *kiai* or *habib* have special status as a highly esteemed person (*pepunden*) in Javanese culture. Idioms such as "to respect parents and teachers means to respect Lord" become social and religious legitimacy among those who have put *kiai* or *habib*'s authority not only as religious, but also social teachers (Mulder, 2001).

Habib Hasan's religious cult gets influence not only from religious doctrine, but also from traditional culture of *nderek kiai* and *jejer pandhita*. As mentioned above, public's dependency on Habib Hasan is strong in relation with eternal and mundane issues. They believe that Habib Hasan is a person with special power in providing social and spiritual advices. This power is a source of efficacy of the blessed water by which people used for religious healing.

Not only temporal and eternal problems that Habib Hasan is able to solve, but also natural and unseen life he is able to communicate with. A fact that many people believe in the existence of unseen creatures. Every people with ability to communicate with such creatures are considered as supranatural man (*orang sakti*), but these people are different in terms of their religious qualification. Habib Hasan has supranatural ability, but he could be classified into shaman, since both of them are sociologically considered having different religious obedience and qualification. But, the similar characteristics between both of them are the ways they encourage public's trust in their abilities in making material and spiritual health.

Ricklefs' study (2012) on Javanese's belief in *kiai* and *habib*'s clerics also makes Habib's authority stronger. Ricklefs stated that

these holy men have admirable power, mastering various Islamic science without having to study it, having a gift of predicting a future, healing illness, even giving immunity. Dhofir's research (1980) on public's belief in *kiai* and *habaib*'s inhumanistic abilities also indicates the ways Habib Hasan is able to be sacred figure and gives a sacred shortcut to get rid of problems.

Since Islam's arrival in Java, *kiai* or *habib* have enjoyed a high social status. Under Dutch colonial rule, Javanese sultans paid much more attention to political aspects of internal empire and delegated *kiai* to deal with Islamic issues. Sultan has given an ultimate authority for *kiai* to manage society in relation to religious matters (Munif, 1992). The special position of *kiai* or *habib* is a social factor contributing on making certain traditions that can maintain their positions in order to make sure that their authorities are central, untouchable, and sacred. In terms of Berger's theory on social engineering, *kiai* or *habib* reached a level of legitimacy, and by using this legitimacy Habib Hasan is able to confirm his ability of preaching, praying, and providing a sacred healing in the blessed water.

Culture is developed by a society based on the material they have (Ardiansyah, 2013). In order to maintain this kind of culture, a material symbol is necessary. Habib Hasan, in this case, is possible to maintain a tradition of asking for material symbols (the blessed water) only if the people used it not merely for maintaining his patronage, but also for maintaining their belief in him.

### **Social Construction of Blessed Water**

Habib Hasan's authority is widely constructed among Krejengan community, and it successfully penetrated and suggested them believe in his ability to provide a solution in any complicated problems, ranging from birth to death issues, only if they asked for the blessed water. This process puts Habib Hasan into externalization of himself as a respectable figure among society in solving their problems through blessed water.

The next process is getting legitimacy from religious sources. People believe that any ritualized practice performed by Habib Hasan is a result of religious ritual commanded by God, and it is God who controls all problems. This process is mostly known as objectivation in which people are easily objectified to take all

religious and traditional values associated with Habib Hasan's character or his blessed water. The level of objectivation takes place in terms of people's unconsciousness to practice their daily activities without having a question of it.

After having a successful use of the blessed water, people will tell about it to others; about their abilities in solving their problems via that water. It is a level in which they get started to socialization of the religious symbols. This process is a way of maintaining and transforming subjective reality into institutionalized identity. The colleagues, close friends, fellow people have a great contribution on maintaining subjective reality. Likewise, in the case of the blessed water, people have believe that it successfully created their identity as a social class with high religious belief system to *habib* or *kiai*.

This identity will be stronger after people make a confirmation on whether the blessed water is efficacious or not. If a confirmation gets a negative result, then it will be asymmetrical, which means that socialization has failed. However, in the case of Habib Hasan, this failure could be minimized, since people who failed to solve their problem through blessed water could be overcome under a doctrine that only God, not Habib, not his blessed water, is an ultimate problem solver. The possibility to blame Habib Hasan could be minimized; any story on these failures will not be spread. Only those who succeed in using the blessed water become a part of marketing elements in distribution of the water.

After going through these process above, people are really internalized with a belief in efficacy of the blessed water. This belief is deeply rooted into their identity which continuously determined their social status in the boarder community of Krejengen Probolinggo. The identity is a key element of subjective reality (Bergerdan Luckman 1990) which constructed social structure and, vice versa, only social structure, in which a belief in the blessed water became more communal in any commodified religious practice, is a determinant aspect contributing on construction of their personal identities.

## Closure

The construction of religious sites, their marketing processes, and the building of patronage in relation with using the blessed

water is possibly described as a 'symbolic economy' around these sites. It is social system under communal worship and search for sacred objects on the one hand, and creation of material symbols requiring a kind of financial support to reproduce these rituals on other hand.

The blessed waters are constructed in Krejengan community through multiple processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. As a result, the blessed water becomes an institutionalized values, norms, and social systems in Krejengan community through legitimacy of cultural and religious values under central figure Habib Hasan who successfully made a social patronase among them.

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